

Open Aggression

How opponents of Linux and advocates both sell with fear of FOSS

Whether or not you subscribe to the theory that the “enemies of Linux” are waging a systematic disinformation campaign against our OS, you have to admit that Linux, FOSS and other forms of open IP come under daily assault from an array of detractors. Among these foes of FOSS number Microsoft itself, members of the enormous ecosystem around Windows, legacy UNIX suppliers and their partners, lobbyists for proprietary IP and elected officials under their sway, and a host of others. From their ranks fly volley after volley (of mostly bird shot) targeted at Linux security, performance, cost of ownership, IP “safety” and other bulls eyes that adorn the well-worn side of the open barn.

More disturbing than these predictable attacks from the detractors of Linux and FOSS are the slings and arrows launched by the ostensible friends of Free and Open Source Software. Their fusillades of friendly fire are usually intended to knock down “straw men” in marketing their wares – products and services designed to work with Linux or other FOSS – but can end up fragging us all.

Such positioning does little to enhance these companies’ offerings, but does much foster uncertainty and to erode confidence in FOSS.

Other suppliers’ messaging sows doubt less directly. Some use Linux and FOSS as loss leaders or bait for their core business offering. Many provide a Linux platform or other FOSS components “as is” (ie, a marginally useful bucket of bits). These same companies cheerfully sell higher-priced proprietary work-alike software when you need a real product, capable of delivering presumably superior security, standards-compliance, real-time responsiveness, throughput, scalability, etc. Others provide embracing warranties and indemnification for their



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A few cases in point:

- Most famously, Open Source Risk Management (OSRM) promotes itself as “Preserving the Benefits of Open Source & Protecting Users Against Risk” with a vision for a world “made safe for Open Source”. In my personal experience, at this year’s Embedded Systems Conference in San Francisco I represented the OSDL on a panel focused Linux in mobile phones and portables. I spoke about boot time and memory footprint; other panelists held forth on power management; a fourth speaker invoked virtualization to preserve legacy software investments and to deliver RTOS-based responsiveness to phone WAN interfaces. This speaker, not content to promote the benefits of virtualization (and of his proprietary product), hauled out several slides worth of FUD, citing “issues” that device manufacturers face with regard to the Linux kernel, device drivers, the GPL, and other chestnuts. He then showed how his offering pretends to let users “Protect Intellectual Property while using Open Source software”.
- A competing virtualization product promotes itself as a “Padded Cell” for “Linux and Legacy Applications . . . that do not satisfy a system’s security and reliability requirements”. A company that offers (IMHO excellent) licensing audit and compliance software nonetheless promotes itself as enabling “companies that develop software using ... open source components to catch and resolve IP issues as they occur in development, instead of in the market or in court” and to “avoid costly shipment delays and expensive legal disputes”.
- Several other companies hedge one type of FOSS with another: at least two companies in the embedded / device software market offer BSD as an alternative to Linux – one boasts that their product features “the rich functionality of BSD Unix without Linux’s troublesome GPL License”.

proprietary wares, but pointedly leave their FOSS customers out in the open and exposed.

What I fear most as an evangelist of Linux/FOSS adoption is Fear itself – Fear coupled with Uncertainty and Doubt. Selling to Fear and Marketing to Pain are part of disciplines that include so-called Strategic Selling in that these practices mean to address real customer needs. And the needs around FOSS are real – corporate lawyers have justifiable concerns about the GPL and other OSS licenses, the Linux kernel does not meet all application needs for responsiveness and throughput, and many many domain-specific requirements will only be met by domain-driven (and often proprietary) solutions. However, practices that employ Selling to Fear do not validate Selling with Fear.

The nascent position that Linux and FOSS occupy in the enterprise is by no means unassailable. Even after a decade of dramatic progress and growing acceptance, even with market shares that top 30% in some segments, Linux and other FOSS enjoy only tentative enthusiasm and commitment from corporate decision makers. Hard-won gains by Linux and FOSS in the enterprise are under constant assault: the lingering SCO v. IBM suit and related cases, new worries about patent infringement and other perceived IP threats, and compliance with regulations like the Sarbanes-Oxley Act number among the fears expressed by IT decision-makers.

But why must apparent advocates of Linux and FOSS play to and, intentionally or not, amplify these fears to call out their added value? Wouldn’t end-users be better served by products and services that stand on their own merits? Instead, users must sort through products emphasizing that they are not Linux or claiming that they somehow make Linux safe. If that is all that an open source company has to offer to end users, then that company is definitely in the wrong business.